Traditionally, Jerusalem has been the focus of longing for Diaspora Jews who were forced from their land and the Temple of their God. Psalm 137 is the well-known lament of the Babylonian Jews who wept "by the rivers of Babylon" and declared, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither."

Yet with Israel a modern state, some see that longing as anachronistic, and with it the phrase that traditionally ends the seder, "Next Year in Jerusalem." The temple was destroyed 2,000 years ago, and many Jews today feel comfortable, religiously and materially, in their Diaspora communities. Some are uncomfortable with the extremes of religious life and the ongoing political strife in the Jewish state. The issue is even more salient for Israeli Jews, residents of a country whose capital is Jerusalem, for whom "next year in Jerusalem" therefore makes little sense on its surface.

What, then, does it mean for today’s Jew to utter the words "next year in Jerusalem" at the end of every Passover seder?

Redemption, Past & Future

The most straightforward answer is that "Jerusalem" refers to the future city—and its Temple—rebuilt when the Messiah comes. Most traditional Jews feel quite comfortable expressing this messianic longing at the end of the seder, just as at the end of each Shabbat Jews recite the hope that the Messiah should come "speedily in our day." And to clarify for Israelis, some traditional Haggadot indicate that those in the Jewish state should replace the phrase with "next year in Jerusalem, the rebuilt," implying a rebuilt Temple.

But many liberal Jews do not accept the idea of the Messiah and the return to a Temple-based Judaism focused on Jerusalem. The phrase "next year in Jerusalem," however, can be interpreted in many different ways. These words convey a web of meaning from concrete to abstract, and from earthly to holy.

Although the phrase itself entered the Haggadah only in the Middle Ages, it resonates thematically with ancient biblical themes of past and future redemption. On the seder night, each participant has personally experienced the physical redemption at that Red Sea. As the Haggadah says, "For it was not our forefathers alone whom the Holy One redeemed; He redeemed us, too, with them," and, "In every generation, every individual must feel as if he or she personally had come out of Egypt." Then, as we end the seder, we utter this phrase that reaches forward to the coming of the Messiah and to complete spiritual redemption, represented by Jerusalem.

The Challenge of Jerusalem

The first challenge is Jerusalem itself—is it a place we want to be, this year or next? According to midrash, Abraham called Jerusalem, which by tradition was the site of Isaac’s near sacrifice, by the name Yireh ("he will see [God]"). But King Malkitzedak had named the city Shalem ("complete"). Not wanting to offend either of these righteous men, God combined the two names into Yerushalayim. And still today the living, breathing Jerusalem burns with the fervor of the holiness implied by Yireh as well as with the hatreds that sunder the wholeness evoked by Shalem.

Jerusalem has acquired something of a superhuman status because of its religious and legendary status as the ancient center of the world and the site of the two Temples. The Holy of Holies within the Temples was the physical space where human and divine would meet, once a year, at Yom Kippur. The High Priest would
approach the inner altar to ask forgiveness for Israel’s sins from God’s Shekhinah, or Presence. Some say the Shekhinah still dwells near the broken Western Wall of the Temple.

This sense of divine presence, which can create a powerful sense of the holy, can also go awry into the reaches of fanaticism, as recent history records all too well. Regardless of where they stand on issues of politics and how to solve Jerusalem’s problems, Jews worldwide look to the Land of Israel with sorrow at the ongoing bloodshed and hatred there. Is there a way, then, to reconcile these extremes so that all Jews can look to “next year in Jerusalem” with hope and not despair?

One possible answer is found in another midrashic understanding of Yerushalayim’s name as a combination of yerushah, or inheritance, and the plural ending, ayim, suggesting a “double” inheritance. Then add the creative imagination of the Rabbis. In a midrash they interpret Psalm 122:3, “Jerusalem built up, a city knit [connected] together,” to mean there are two Jerusalems. Yerushalayim Shel Matah is the earthly Jerusalem, which may be the object of our ambivalence but is also the source of Torah, and Yerushalayim Shel Maalah, the upper Jerusalem—a heavenly version relieved of the contradictions of human life.

For some Jews, this upper Jerusalem is perhaps the appropriate object of our longings at the end of the seder. It represents the possibility of intimacy with God that is relieved of the trappings of religious polemic. It offers us the shelemut, completeness, that often feels beyond reach in our shattered daily lives. Finally, it may represent the final peace of messianic redemption.

**God in the Earthly Jerusalem**

But the rabbis were wary, as we should be, of the consequences of making Jerusalem into an ideal, abstracted from the realities of its everydayness. A midrash related in *The Book of Legends*, edited by H.N. Bialik, asks what is meant by Hosea 11:9, which states, “The Holy One in the midst of thee, and I will not come into the city”? Rabbi Isaac related the following explanation by Rabbi Yohanan: “’The holy one’ refers not to God but to the holy city, and God the Holy One is saying, ‘I will not come into the city of Jerusalem that is above until I first come into the city of Jerusalem that is below.’”

Perhaps, then, it is our responsibility to make the world, and the earthly Jerusalem, into a place where God can reside, and if not now, then perhaps “next year.” In every Torah service, we repeat the words of Isaiah 2:3, which proclaim Jerusalem as the source of God’s Torah and ethical teachings: “For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” The very next verse in Isaiah offers a classic description of the messianic future: “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: Nations shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war.”

One interpretation is that by implementing God’s word, the Jewish people in the Diaspora and in Israel can have a role in bringing peace to the world and to Jerusalem.

**Eternal Hope**

For Diaspora Jews who find it difficult to authentically recite this phrase at the end of the seder, the opening words, “next year,” offer another entry point. The uttering of “next year in Jerusalem” is a way of expressing solidarity with Klal Yisrael, the entire Jewish community, past, present and future. “Next year” encapsulates that continuing flicker of hope that has sustained Jews for centuries past in the midst of despair. It also offers hope that the Israeli nation of today will find peace and that Jerusalem will remain a potential future haven for Diaspora Jews who still live under political and economic oppression.

But our phrase also offers a more majestic sense of hope. The words “next year” suggest a sense of being on the cusp but not yet having arrived, of possibility that is ripe and alive with implication. Rabbi David Hartman, in *The Leader’s Guide to the Family Participation Haggadah: A Different Night* sees a “radical futurism” reflected in the phrase, with its intimation of messianic possibility. He sees both the miracles of creation and
the exodus from Egypt as pointing to the potential for revolutionary change—that things don’t have to be the way they are, that oppressive regimes can change.

Every year, he writes, Jews drink four cups of wine and then pour a fifth for Elijah. "The cup is poured, but not yet drunk. Yet the cup of hope is poured every year. Passover is the night for reckless dreams; for visions about what a human being can be, what society can be, what people can be, what history may become. That is the significance of ‘Le-shanah ha-ba-a b’Yerushalayim’ (Next year in Jerusalem)."